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By John von Radowitz, Health Correspondent, PA News

PASSIVE SMOKING 'NOT SIGNIFICANT CANCER MENACE'

Passive smoking does not pose a significant cancer risk, a controversial report from a team of top scientists said today.

The finding, based on an analysis of 48 studies published worldwide, flies in the face of the widely-held view that inhaling other people's tobacco smoke is dangerous. It could have important implications for the regulation of smoking in public places. The research was carried out by a working group of respected European experts on molecular biology, genetics and statistics.

They concluded that previous thinking about the hazards of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) based on experiments with laboratory rats was misplaced. Earlier studies had also been prone to distortion due to statistical bias, it was claimed. However, anti-smoking campaigners are quick to point out that the study was sponsored by three major tobacco companies, Philip Morris Europe, British-American Tobacco and Rothmans International. They also stress that it ignores harmful effects other than cancer, like bronchitis.

The scientists insist they maintained a strictly neutral stance throughout. Professor Jeffrey Idle, who chaired the working group, said he only agreed to set up the research on the strict understanding that even if the results were unfavourable to tobacco interests they would be published in full.

In 1992 the US Environmental Protection Agency classified ETS as a class-A carcinogen, setting the benchmark for attitudes towards passive smoking today. But according to the new study the evidence on which this conclusion was based was flawed. More recent research had shown that just because rats exposed to high doses of a cancer causing chemical developed tumours this did not mean lower levels of the same substance would present a reduced risk to humans.

Professor Idle, Professor in Medicine and Molecular Biology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, said today: "What has been appreciated since then is that at low exposure levels we have defence mechanisms that de-activate and get rid of these chemicals and repair the damage. The chemical constituents of ETS are at a very low concentration indeed."

Statistical bias was another important factor, he said. In particular, major errors had resulted from people wrongly stating to researchers that they were non-smokers or had never smoked.

The study put the relative risk of non-smokers who lived with smokers developing lung cancer at 1.01, while the relative risk of passive smoking in the workplace was 1.04. In the language of statistics a figure of anything over five would be considered a strong correlation, while below two is too small to be of any significance.

Professor Idle said he hoped those responsible for setting the rules for smoking in public places would take notice of the scientific evidence.

"There are many reasons why smoking is restricted in public areas, one of them being the

cancer risk," he said. "Our bottom line is that there is no reason for believing that environmental tobacco smoke increases the risk of getting lung cancer."

A spokeswoman for the anti-smoking pressure group ASH (Action on Smoking and Health) said: "This study is funded by the tobacco industry and therefore we're not surprised by these findings. But just about every other independent scientist who has looked at this issue has come to the contrary conclusion.

"There are also other problems associated with smoking like bronchitis and emphysema which haven't been touched on in this report.

"The whole future of the tobacco industry rests on the issue of passive smoking. We want to see legislation to control smoking in public places, because the voluntary system doesn't work. This report is a delaying tactic to stop this happening and designed to cause confusion among the general public."

Professor Richard Peto, Professor of Medical Statistics at the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, said: "All competent scientists who have examined the evidence now available agree that cigarette smoking is, beyond reasonable doubt, a cause of most lung cancer. Cigarette smoke is such a potent cause of human cancer that it cannot be argued that passive smoking is harmless, although the size of the risk to non-smokers is still unresolved."

Dr John Moore-Gillon, chairman of the British Lung Foundation, commented: "The findings of this analysis, which was paid for by the tobacco industry, is in direct contrast to the views of every world-respected expert in the field.

"When the World Health Organisation says one thing about the risks of smoking and the tobacco industry says another, I know which I find easier to believe."